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ABSTRACT

Societal conditions and higher education in China are discussed based on a recent trip to the People's Republic of China, conversations with representatives from the Ministry of Education, and visits to Chungshan University in Kwangchow (Canton), Futan University in Shanghai, the University of Szechwan in Chengtu, and Chiaotung (Communications) University in Sian. Recent changes in the educational system in China can be understood in relation to the effects of industrialization. Societies in the process of industrializing depend on people who can understand and operate the new technologies brought be economic development. The educational system serves the economic system by producing people who can work in the occupations and organizations created by industrialization. Two different sectors emerge in the educational system: a mass sector and an elite sector. In the mass sector are the primary and secondary schools that train people in the basic skills needed to work with machines and in complex organizations. In the elite sector are those schools that teach people how to innovate and to manage the new system. Entry to the mass sector is available by right, to the elite sector by selection. The Cultural Revolution challenged the elite sector but did not succeed in toppling it. The great achievement was the expansion of the mass sector. The emphasis on rapid economic development among the moderates in control of China today has revived the elite sector, and the implications of this for reducing inequalities are momentous. (Author/SW)

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Abstract

AFTER THE REVOLUTION COMES THE EDUCATIONAL TESTING SERVICE: NOTES ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA 1978

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Societies in the process of industrializing depend on people who can understand and operate the new technologies brought by economic development. The educational system increasingly serves the economic system by producing people who can work in the occupations and organizations spawned by industrialization. Two different sectors emerge in the educational system: a mass sector and an elite sector. In the mass sector are the primary and secondary schools that train people in the basic skills needed to work with machines and in complex organizations. In the elite sector are those secondary schools and universities that teach people how to innovate and to manage the new system. Entry to the mass sector is available by right, to the elite sector by selection. Recent changes in the educational system in the People's Republic of China can be understood in these terms. While it challenged the elite sector, the Cultural Revolution did not succeed in toppling it. The great achievement of the Cultural Revolution was the expansion of the mass sector. The emphasis on rapid economic development among the moderates in control of China today has revived the elite sector. The implications of this for reducing inequalities are momentous.

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NOTES ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA 1978

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May, 1979

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I was one of the many Americans to visit China recently. Between November 17 and December 3, 1978 -- only a few weeks before the official announcement of normalization of relations between the United States and China -- two groups were brought together under the auspices of the University of San Francisco for a tour of China. One group was interested mainly in art, the other in education.

The twenty-two people interested in education were connected to colleges and universities in some way. About half were faculty members or administrators from institutions in Alaska, California, Tennessee, Michigan, Minnesota and Missouri. There were also two foundation officials; the former director of a federal educational agency; an undergraduate from Evergreen State College; a psychiatrist; the head of a big-city department of social services; and a fund-raiser for a religious order. Two people from the Educational Testing Service proved to be especially attractive to Chinese educational administrators.

The ideological center of gravity in our group was probably populist, and we sympathized with the struggles of the Chinese to improve the lives of ordinary people. By the time we arrived, the Chinese government was making agreements with governments and other companies from all over the world for oil rigs and mining equipment, electronics and computers, Intercontinental hotels and Coca-Cola. Modernization was being pursued with a vengeance after the deprivations of the Cultural Revolution and the "Gang of Four." Our hosts "had a lot to learn" from their "foreign friends" because they had "a long way to go" in achieving their "four modernizations" (in industry, the military, science and technology, and agriculture). Evidence of the new openness was apparent wherever we went; although we did not know it, the democratic poster campaign had just begun in Peking as we arrived in China. Our guides allowed us freedom to move, though little

time -- we were free to wander wherever we wished in the cities we visited. Our reception was especially warm at the universities.

While we were part of a general tour group, we had requested visits to a variety of post-secondary institutions. On our arrival, we did not know where we would be taken; indeed, we did not hear word about a meeting with representatives of the Ministry of Education until four days before our departure. While we asked to be taken to workers' colleges, agricultural schools, cadre training centers, and sites for educational television and radio, we were only taken to universities. And these were all in the elite sector of the system. Universities in China are now divided into two types, keypoints or "comprehensive" universities and "ordinary" universities. Keypoint universities, under the control of the central Ministry of Education, take the most qualified students and offer the best instruction and facilities. Ordinary universities are under the control of provinces and municipalities; they are less selective, less well-endowed, and less prestigious than the keypoints.[1]

We did not go to the most prestigious keypoint universities, such as Peking University and Tsinghua University in Peking. We visited Chungshan (Sun Yat-Sen) University in Kwangchow (Canton), Futan University in Shanghai, the University of Szechwan in Chengtu, and Chiaotung (Communications) University in Sian. The arrangements and tone of our visits at each university differed but what we learned from each -- while only part of the whole story -- was consistent. I want to draw on the information we were able to gather at these four universities, and on what we learned from a long meeting with representatives from the Ministry of Education.

The Two-Track System and the Persistence of Inequality[2]

Societies in the process of industrializing depend on people who can understand and operate the new technologies brought by economic development. The educational system increasingly serves the economic system by producing people who can work in the occupations and organizations spawned by industrialization. Two different sectors in education emerge: A mass sector and an elite sector. In the mass sector are the primary and secondary schools that train people in the basic skills needed to work with machines and in complex organizations. In the elite sector are those secondary schools and universities that teach people how to innovate and to manage the new system. Entry to the mass sector is available by right; entry to the elite sector is a matter of selection.

In the early stages of economic development, it is not necessary that large numbers be educated at the highest levels as long as enough people have the basic skills to work within the industrial parts of the economy. Those who make it to the upper levels of education are usually accorded high prestige and relative freedom to do their work. As more people complete secondary schools and as the benefits of a college education become apparent, demand for access to it increases. In later stages of industrialization ("post-industrialism"), the educational system can expand at higher levels and an even more complex economy still absorb highly educated people. But as we have seen in our own country, and more tragically in some under-developed countries like India, it is difficult to modulate the production of college graduates once institutions of higher education exist.

Even more difficult to control is the belief in the right to equality -- applied to education, this belief brings some messy problems for the scenario I have just sketched. As long as college graduates appear to get more

benefits and incur fewer costs -- whether material or symbolic -- than non - college graduates, people will want to go to college or send their children there. And they will believe they have a right to such hopes if they live in a society that tells them everyone should be equal.

But higher education does not treat people equally, especially in the early stages of economic development when the numbers going to colleges and universities are small. Some principle must be devised to locate and select the students most likely to learn; to some degree, this principle must contain judgements of academic merit or performance. Not everyone can pass this test. How to teach the students who are selected and what to teach them in ways that will be more or less related to what they will be doing in the future must be worked out. Curriculum and teaching cannot be the same in all fields. Differences are determined by the very nature of the disciplines: Instruction in the physical sciences, for example, is more expensive than instruction in the humanities. Finally, how to deploy college graduates once they complete their schooling is another issue that must be handled in some way; again, the results are usually not equal. In other words, most obviously in the selection and enrollment of students but also in curriculum and instruction and in the placement of graduates, there are inherent inequalities in higher education.

I have been arguing, then, that a country in the process of economic development comes to depend increasingly on the educational system for training people who can operate with new technologies. The educational system divides into mass and elite sectors. In the elite sector, universities are especially important because they produce the people and the knowledge necessary for developing and managing the industrial economy. Rewards to college graduates accumulate over time. This is perceived by non-college graduates. If the political system also promises

equality, this legitimizes more personal demands for a college education. Unlike the mass sector, participation in the elite sector is not automatic. Higher education selects, instructs, and allocates life chances unequally. There is a built-in conflict between mass and elite aims in education in societies that encourage a belief in equality.

I want to trace this argument through in the context of China, as it has been struggling with equality and expertise in the earliest stages of its economic development. While this issue can be traced back to the earliest days of Liberation if not before[3], I will refer only to the period of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1966-1969 and the years immediately following to analyse the meaning of the extraordinary changes in higher education since 1976.[4]

The De-Legitimation of Higher Education

The Cultural Revolution posed the egalitarian ideal at its most extreme. It attacked the inequalities left over from pre-Liberation days and those that had developed after 1949. Of course, some of these inequalities -- less respect for people who did manual work, for example -- expressed old Chinese culture. But that they had been allowed to continue, or to reassert themselves, became the issues for the Cultural Revolution. The dominance of the city over the countryside, the greater value placed on mental over manual labor, the power of cadres over ordinary citizens, the growing bureaucratization of Chinese life, the elaboration of ranking systems in schools, the army, factories and elsewhere, the reliance on "expertise" were all questioned as the Cultural Revolution proceeded.

Perhaps because it is a vulnerable institution -- but also because of its pivotal position in the developing economy -- education became a primary target. And with some reason. In 1965 on the eve of the Cultural Revolution,

universal junior high school education was far from a reality in the countryside and it was even unrealized in some large cities. This whole educational system was differentiated in ways that promoted inequalities. Full-time state-supported schools produced an educated elite, while min-pan schools ("schools run by the people") funded by neighborhoods and villages ran part-time with inferior facilities. Schools for girls, for Overseas Chinese, and for cadres' children brought special advantages. The most blatant inequalities resulted from the keypoint system, which began at the primary level and continued up through the universities. Admission to keypoints was determined by scores on an entrance examination, as well as by class background and the student's political activism. The keypoint schools received more funds from the state than ordinary state-supported schools and maintained the highest standards. This stratification system put national keypoint universities at the top and municipal non-keypoint colleges at the bottom, with entrance to all universities determined by scores on a unified entrance examination. China's college students in the early 1960s, according to estimates from Suzanne Pepper, were primarily from urban families. In the top universities, those from white collar families probably predominated.[5]

By all accounts, instruction involved mostly lecturing and rote memorization of abstract material. Teachers held unquestioned authority. In the universities, being "expert" was more important than being "red", and academic rank became the main determinant of a faculty member's prestige, power and salary.

The Cultural Revolution changed all of this with great suddenness. Special schools and the keypoint system were abolished. So were academic ranks and entrance examinations. Grades and academic achievements were deemphasized. Admission to schools -- even the universities -- was increasingly unselective, and preference was given to students from worker and peasant

backgrounds. More schools were opened at the primary level, particularly in the countryside. Local control was expanded, central control reduced. Schools were managed by "revolutionary" committees composed of local cadres, peasants, teachers, and students. Work-study schedules were introduced into urban schools and universities, while the school year -- and the total number of years spent at each level -- were collapsed so that students could work in factories and farms. Textbooks were revised, students were encouraged to talk during classroom discussions, and teachers were told to experiment with their teaching.

The campaign to reform the educational system eventually went to pieces. Criticisms of elitism rapidly degenerated into blanket attacks on experts who by definition could never be red enough. Life became a round of political meetings and student rampages. Students did little academic work but it was virtually impossible for teachers to fail them. Students who studied and teachers who prepared too much were accused of personal ambition. Experiments encouraged one year were denigrated a year later. Suzanne Pepper gives an example:

> At one point, the teachers were encouraged to devise new methods for teaching English. They introduced photographic exhibitions for the students to view and discuss, oral reports, and group discussion. Some of these methods proved quite effective in activating student interest. Yet the teachers who promoted them were subsequently criticized at school meetings for "putting education first" and the new methods were abandoned.[6]

Again and again in our conversations with students and teachers, they told us that they had done "nothing" for as long as three or four years. Many had been in a state of constant anxiety or paralysis -- and some still were. A common expression during those times was to say that "to study is useless."

By 1968, many urban schools and universities had suspended their operations as students and teachers were "sent down" to the countryside to "learn

from the peasants." Faculty could not teach and were often forced to do manual labor. Some were brutally attacked, while others retreated into their own lives as much as they could. The suppression of the academics was apparently so thorough that even Charles Bettelheim, a severe critic of the current regime from the French Left, writes in a recent article entitled "The Great Leap Backward" that

> ...the leaders of the Left took a sectarian attitude toward scientists and artists. Consequently, obstacles were placed in the way of the development of literary and artistic activity. The right to read foregin periodicals and books was narrowly restricted... On the pretext of exercising strict supervision of publications and of all literary, cinematic, theatrical, and similar activities, the number of new works allowed to appear was kept small. In the scientific domain the number of works published was drastically reduced and most scientific journals ceased to appear. Even access to libraries was severely restricted.[7]

Education -- and particularly higher education -- from 1966 through the early 1970s had become illegitimate in the eyes of many students. Certainly it had become a dangerous pursuit. The enrollment and selection system had been turned upside down, as had the stratification of the schools. The length of schooling and the content of the curriculum had been changed in fundamental ways. The authority of the teachers had been discredited. And the links among class background, amount of schooling and future work had been disconnected. All the demons that higher education brings -- having a system of selection that favors the urban, educated classes, promoting abstract knowledge and the authority of the teacher, providing graduates with better opportunities -- were exorcised during the Cultural Revolution.

The Two-Track System Returns

But the demons were conjured up again. This was due partly because the Cultural Revolution went too far in challenging the two-track system, partly because some of the reforms did not work (putting day-to-day management of the schools and universities in the hands of workers and peasants was a disaster), and partly because the Cultural Revolution was a power struggle between radicals and moderates at the very center of government -- a struggle that the radicals lost.

The radicals' economic and political failures strenghtened the moderates. Many people spoke about ten years lost in the development of the Chinese economy. The hunger to have a better life -- to make up for lost time -- was so much a part of the spirit of China in 1978 that the "four modernizations" and "welcome the foreigners" barely begin to express the intensity of the yearning. Much of what has happened in education since 1976 must be understood in these terms. Not unlike the sixties in this country, the Cultural Revolution turns out to have been an interlude -- for China, on the path to economic development. Like our sixties, it had profound effects.

Which of the changes from the Cultural Revolution remain? Suzanne Pepper summarizes these: (1) The extension of education to all primary school-age children and the expansion of secondary schooling. These are not being questioned by the current regime. (2) The shortened primary and secondary school curriculum. This is being retained. (3) Campus factories and workshops. These are being continued, although manual labor and work-study schedules are being drastically curtailed. (4) Irregular schools such as workers' universities and peasants' colleges are being kept, along with radio and television instruction which are being expanded. As Pepper points out -- and this is verified by our conversation with the people from the

Ministry of Education -- these schools will help to meet the educational demands of the millions of people who cannot attend the best universities.

The Cultural Revolution, then, has had the enduring effect of extending the basic educational level of the mass of the population and providing alternatives for those who cannot enroll in the elite educational sector. But existence of a two-track system is no longer in question. Efforts to transform the "elitist nature of the education system by cutting off the top of the pyramid" have been blocked sharply and swiftly.[8]

China is now gearing up its economy at a dizzying rate; as a producer of the expertise needed to achieve the four modernizations, higher education is very much part of this campaign. Representatives of the Ministry of Education told us that they needed to train specialists quickly so the economy can stand on "two legs." By 1985, they expected to have two million students enrolled in colleges and universities (the current overall enrollment is approximately 1.2 million). The universities we visited planned to expand their enrollments at a rate that exceeded the overall growth projected by the Ministry for 1985. Chungshan University in Kwangchow now has students andwants to expand to 10,000 by 1985. Futan University in Shanghai has a current enrollment of 3700 students andwants to grow to 12,000. Szechwan University in Chengtu has 3300 students now and wants 10,000 , and the Communications University in Sian enrolls 4300 students but expects 15,000.

These matters are too important to be left to local officials and the universities, so the Ministry of Education has centralized planning for enrollment, curriculum, and manpower deployment. It has introduced a national examination again and is attempting to standardize its scoring. Faculty from universities and experienced teachers from middle schools meet in conference before the entrance examinations are given and work out norms for grading.

This system is apparently a cumbersome one, for the Ministry of Education representatives closely questioned my two colleagues from the Educational Testing Service. My notes from that meeting show the following entry:

> In quite dramatic fashion they passed around two copies of this past year's entrance examination which we all had been hungering for. We were grateful to see them, even though the only tests we could understand were in English and math. Almost as an exchange, the Chinese then asked the ETS people all kinds of questions, most of them very concrete and practical. What are the American examination boards? What is the College Board? Who makes up the entrance examinations? How are they administered? On how many subjects do you examine? How many students take it? What is the relationship between the content of the tests and what is taught in your secondary schools? How many of the students who apply can be accepted? How do you machine score your examinations? Can you tell us the number and the style of the computer you use?

Enrollment projections for each university are worked out centrally, with account taken of the enrollment capacity of the universities and the agricultural and industrial needs of each province. It appears that curricula will soon be centrally determined, although in the scramble to do everything at once, academic departments are devising their own teaching materials. Finally, university graduates are placed in jobs according to whether they are from keypoint or from ordinary universities. Graduates of keypoints can be sent to work anywhere in the country, while graduates of the ordinary universities are usually assigned to jobs within the home province or municipality.

The selection process is quite competitive. Performance on the entrance examination is the most important basis for selection; we were told that "physical and "moral" characteristics were taken into account in deciding among those who pass the examination. This means that the best and most reliable students will go to the best universities. Undoubtedly, most will come from the cities and from educated families. This result seems especially

likely because of other new arrangements. For instance, ability tracking is back in the secondary schools: students in lower tracks will find it difficult to compete with those in the high track. The old two-class system of full-day and part-time schools has reappeared. The keypoints have been restored, along with some of the special schools that were operating before the Cultural Revolution. While graduation from secondary school is required for the entrance examination -- another source of inequality since the large majority of rural youth do not graduate from secondary school -- youngsters with special talents in mathematics or languages, for example, are being identified and sent to the best universities. Even the faculty are being tracked: One group spends most of its time doing research, while the other does most of the teaching.[9]

The competition has sent young people back to their books. At Middle School #31 of the Peking municipality, a favored keypoint school, I asked how many graduates last year took the university entrance examination. I was astonished to hear that two-hundred out of four-hundred took the examination. Of these, about forty actually enrolled in a university. Twenty were in keypoint universities. From the Ministry of Education, we learned that 6.1 million people applied to take the entrance examinations this past year, approximately 1.2 million passed, but only 400,000 (or 7% of those who took the exam) were actually enrolled.[10]

The amount of time being devoted to physical labor and practical application of studies was being curtailed everywhere we went, in a pronounced shift back to theory. Classroom discipline, the return of many experienced teachers who had been in disfavor during the Cultural Revolution, the importance of academic achievement, and the reintroduction of academic ranks have all succeeded in making education legitimate again. The reassertion of the value of studying was visible everywhere we went. A major preoccupation among the young people we met in the cities was to get into the university of

their choice. Young adults who had been secondary school students during the Cultural Revolution complained about the burdens of having to catch up now. More than eight million of the so-called "educated youth" sent down to the countryside remain there. We were told that many of them see going to a university as their only way out.[11] Graduating from a university is one of the few legitimate ways to express some individual choice about occupation.[12]

Inequalities are being generated through the competitive selection and enrollment system, through differences among the universities and between disciplines, and through different occupational routes after graduation. When we pressed them on this issue, the cadres from the Ministry of Education pointed to the "alternative" sector, such as workers' and peasants' college and television courses. Several times, they emphasized that cut-off scores and enrollment quotas differed by province. Students from provinces with poor secondary schools pass with a lower score than students from provinces with good schools. Rural students have extra time to prepare for the examination.

The people from the Ministry of Education did not deny that the new system might perpetuate inequalities, especially between the cities and the countryside. But in the short run they would have to be tolerated in the struggle for economic development. In any case, China cannot rely on its educational system to solve social problems; only improved economic conditions could do that.

Most young people were well aware of the students and scholars who were being sent by the government to the best universitites abroad. While few of them believed they would be selected, this development underscores the weight the government is placing on higher education, particularly in the sciences and technology. The elite sector is being advanced rapidly in the plans for economic development. So the very people who were lauded during the Cultural Revolution -- workers, peasants, and educated youth who stayed in the country-

side-- lose under the new system. The Cultural Revolution's success in expanding the mass education sector softened the most extreme effects of educational stratification. But the current selection systems based increasingly on performance on a competitive national examination pulls in the opposite direction.

FOOTNOTES

1. For an excellent description of education in China through 1977, see Suzanne Pepper, "An Interview on Changes in Chinese Education After the 'Gang of Four'", China Quarterly, 72 (December 1977), 815-824 and Suzanne Pepper, "Education and Revolution: The 'Chinese Model' Revised", Asian Survey, 18 (September 1978), 847-890.

2. I sketch a view shaped by many sources, the most recent to be found in Jerome Karabel and A.H. Halsey (eds.), Power and Ideology in Education, New York:Oxford University Press, 1977. Chapters especially useful to the argument are Marianne Bastid, "Economic Necessity and Political Ideals in Educational Reform During the Cultural Revolution," 589-607; Earl I. Hopper, "A Typology for the Classification of Educational Systems," 153-166; Daniel Bell, "On Meritocracy and Equality," 607-635.

3. For good accounts of education in China through the Cultural Revolution, see John Gardner and Wilt Idema, "China's Educational Revolution," in Stuart R. Schram, Authority, Participation and Cultural Change in China, Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1973; and Peter J. Seybolt, Revolutionary Education in China: Documents and Commentary, White Plains, N.Y.: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1973.

4. For personal accounts of the Cultural Revolution, particularly as it affected education, see David and Nancy Milton, The Wind Will Not Subside, N.Y.:Random House, 1976. The Miltons taught at the Peking First Foreign Languages Institute from 1964 to 1969. Gordon A. Bennett and Ronald N. Montaperto, Red Guard, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1972 presents an account based on interviews with a student who left China after the Cultural Revolution.

5. Suzanne Pepper, "Education and Revolution," 850-852.

6. Suzanne Pepper, "Education and Revolution," 860.

7. Charles Bettelheim, "The Great Leap Backward," Monthly Review 30 (July - August 1978), 97.

8. Suzanne Pepper, "Education and Revolution," 887.

9. While we kept hearing about student-faculty ratios of 3 and 4 to 1 at the universities we visited, the load is being borne disproportionately by faculty in their late thirties and forties. Many of these people, educated before the Cultural Revolution, had been frozen into their current positions for ten and more years. In a system where few people are fired or re-assigned, the universities are filled with faculty members who are

Footnotes

practically useless. The youngest faculty educated during the Cultural Revolution are incompetent to teach and, until they complete re-training programs such as short-term courses in other universities and "receive guidance" from more senior faculty, they cannot carry their weight. The senior faculty do practically no teaching, partly because it is not expected of them and partly because they are far behind in their training. The universities can afford to wait a few years since they are still under-enrolled. But given their ambitious enroliment projections, they do not have time to spare. It will be instructive for Americans to watch how well the Chinese do with their version of "faculty development."

10. There is some dispute among China scholars about university enrollment figures, as there is about statistics in general. The figures we were given are probably somewhat inflated. The total number of newly enrolled students in 1978 is more often given as 300,000. For statistics on higher education in China for approximately the same period this paper covers, see Clark Kerr et. al., Observations on the Relations Between Education and Work in the People's Republic of China: Report of a Study Group, Berkeley, Cal.: Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1978.

11. Youth from more priveleged class backgrounds are reclassified as workers or peasants after moving to the countryside. Since it is likely that more of them will be going to universities than young people from worker or peasant origins, figures on the class backgrounds of university students should be viewed with some caution. De-rusticated youth may account for large numbers of peasant and worker students.

12. Typically, young people are assigned to a factory or other workplace by their municipalities several months after they leave school; once placed, it is difficult to change one's place of work.